

## TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY

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## ABSTRACT

While learning a foreign language, students shall use a material they learn at classes and put it into practice in their everyday activities. To achieve this, the first thing they should learn is their language building material – words. Students need to use them in conversations, to understand the meanings of words they hear, to identify words in written context in the process of reading and to use them for expressing their thoughts and feelings in writing. English teachers always face the problem of how to choose the English vocabulary and how to get the highest performance from their students on learning vocabulary. In this paper I will consider some methods of teaching English vocabulary in general and in particular the aspect of teaching English vocabulary in Japan.

## Introduction

Teaching vocabulary is one of the most important aspects of teaching a foreign language. The content of the speech is expressed in words. To master a language means to first of all assimilate a certain vocabulary for naming objects, actions and states.

The great importance of words can be seen in the following quotes which may inspire teachers to pay more attention to teaching vocabulary and motivate students to build a large vocabulary while learning English.

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.

Proverbs 25:11

Words ... so innocent and powerless as they are - as standing in a dictionary; how potent for good and evil they become - in the hands of one who knows how to combine them.

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Words are tools which automatically carve concepts out of experience.

Julian Sorrell Huxley

Words, when well chosen, have so great a force in them that a description often gives us more lively ideas than the sight of things themselves.

Joseph Addison

By words the mind is winged.

Aristophanes

A blow with a word strikes deeper than a blow with a sword.

Robert Burton

For one word a man is often deemed to be wise, and for one word he is often deemed to be foolish.

Confucius

Every language instructor can agree that without memorizing words and understanding their meanings absolutely no progress in language learning is possible. As Wilkins (1972) says: "...without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." The importance of lexis is stressed by many modern linguists. D. Lewis (1993) boldly proclaims that "grammar as structure is subordinate to lexis.". A. Little (1994) also stresses the priority of lexis: "Words inevitably come before structures." D. Willis (1990) adds that it is easier for learners to start exploration of the language if they start from lexis, which is concrete, rather than from grammatical rules. Then Willis and Willis (2009) conclude: "We need to shift the emphasis in teaching foreign languages to a focus on understanding and expressing meanings. This almost certainly entails beginning with a more lexical approach and gradually integrating grammar, once learners have a wide enough vocabulary to be able to see how grammar can help fine-tune their message."

### **The main tasks of work on lexis**

While learning a foreign language, students master its lexis in order to use it in conversations and oral narrations, to understand the meanings of words in utterances they hear, to identify words in written context in the process of reading and to use them for written exposition of their thoughts. To achieve this goal, the material that students have to master should be clearly determined and the system of deployment should be worked out. To determine the teaching material for lexis means to make up a list of words and phrases that students need to acquire during the whole period of learning and at its separate stages. The words selected should be frequently used in the language, easily combined, unlimited from the point of view of style, included in the topics in the prescribed syllabus and valuable from the point of view of word-building. The selection of the vocabulary, although important, is not the teachers' main concern. It is usually prescribed for them by textbooks and study-guides they use. The teachers' concern is how to get their students to assimilate it. This is a difficult problem and it is still in the process of being solved. The word is considered to be learned when it is spontaneously recognized while hearing and reading and it is correctly used in speech.

In Japan it is common for students of all ages to use word cards to memorize English words. In spite of the fact that it may help them at some stages of their language acquisition, in general, I do not recommend this method. Students memorize the words but do not combine them properly in different kinds of sentences. Consequently, they fail to recognize the words and their meanings in context. Such "learning" tends to become just a useless mechanical overloading of memory with no educational benefit.

Charles Fries says, "It is not the meaning of the words themselves but an intricate system of formal features which makes possible the grasp of what we generally call 'meaning': train, boy, house, take - conveys no meaning. *The boy takes a train to his house* is full of meaning". He concludes, "The meaning is not in the words themselves but in the words as a pattern." (Fries, 1957).

N. I. Zhinkin (1958) writes: "The man never says separate words at all if they are not phrases at the same time. No one will all of a sudden say an apple, a web, etc. In different situations, different reports and

motives will be spoken: here is an apple, I want an apple, I don't want an apple, this is not an apple, etc."

This idea was also emphasized by I. A. Gruzinskaya (1938) who wrote, "The word lives and develops only in an integral speech complex, only accompanied by other words, in interrelation with them." That is why while teaching vocabulary the teacher should introduce students words in sentence patterns in different situations and present the words in keeping with the structures to be taught.

The same ideas were developed in the works of many authors dating back to the 1990's. Thus lexis and grammar are considered inseparable in nature and completely interdependent (Sinclair, 1991; Hunston & Francis, 1998). Willis (1993) also notes that grammar and lexis are two ways of picturing the same linguistic objective. That is, lexis consists of word - meaning patterns, while the grammar consists of structures, and categorizes words according to such structures. Willis thinks teachers need to pay more attention to lexical elements in the classroom. He considers that "language learners have to work simultaneously with the grammar and the lexicon." But, especially, in the beginners' stage of learning language the priority should be on lexis. "In the early stages of learning, learners achieve meanings by putting words together without paying too much attention to grammatical niceties. When producing language spontaneously they consistently produce utterances like *Yesterday I go cinema* instead of *Yesterday I went to the cinema*." "...it is possible to communicate effectively in a language for all kinds of purposes without conforming closely to a standard grammar." (Willis and Willis, 2009).

### **Receptive and reproductive assimilation of lexis**

It is generally known that Japanese students' vocabulary is poor. They have trouble with hearing, speaking, reading and writing. Learning the words of a foreign language is not that easy since every word has its form, meaning and usage and each of these aspects may have its difficulties.

The character of assimilation of English lexical units can be different. If students assimilate words in such a way that they understand them while reading or listening, we speak of a receptive (passive) assimilation. When they can use the new words for expressing their thoughts in the process of oral or written communication we speak of a

reproductive (active) assimilation of lexis.

A certain number of textbook words are initially assimilated reproductively but later due to insufficient use in speaking they become part of the receptive store.

There is a group of new words in textbook texts meant for synthetic reading that are introduced just for conveying certain content interesting for students. Students understand the meanings of these words from the context or some explanations added to the text. No more work is done the words later, but some of them remain in the students' memory.

Some texts for teaching reading with the help of a dictionary and texts for home reading are also the source of new receptive lexis.

It's impossible to differentiate clearly between receptive and reproductive lexis in the student's accomplishments. Sometimes, in a certain communicative situation the student uses in his speech the words he came across in some texts and did not use in conversational exercises. It means that receptive lexical units suddenly become reproductive. At the same time, a reverse process may be noticed when words belonging to active lexis turn to passive (receptive) due to their insufficient use in speaking.

Assimilation of receptive lexis is connected with the following kinds of work:

- 1) Analysis of phonetic structure and spelling of words.
- 2) Phonetic reproduction of the assimilated lexical units.
- 3) Reading texts containing the lexis assimilated receptively.
- 4) Listening to texts with receptive lexical material.
- 5) Working with separate words: reading, listening, translation.

#### **Work with words in a sentence and work with discrete lexical units**

Considering different issues of working on lexis methods, we should first of all clear up the goal of this work. Learning lexis apparently makes for practical mastering of the language. Consequently the system of lexical exercises should build up the skill of using assimilated words for expressing one's thoughts in English and understanding the corresponding oral and written reports containing those words. Teachers should combine work on words

in a context with work on separate lexical units.

To get acquainted with phonetic characteristics of one particular word and master its pronunciation, in some cases it might be helpful to withdraw the word from context, analyze its phonetic structure and compare it with analogous phonations in other words. Otherwise the student may find it hard to catch the specific characteristics of the word pronunciation.

The work on an individual word is also meant to teach the students to identify and comprehend it in different contexts. For this purpose it is helpful to use exercises in which the student focuses on a separate word and its meanings and analyses the structure of the word and its word-building elements, which is necessary for fluent use. There are also quite important exercises in which students first recollect an individual word with associations that were made up on the basis of the preliminary work on that word in context, and then bring it into a word combination and into a sentence. Such exercises are a supplement to the ones in which direct reproduction of word combinations and sentences with the word takes place.

#### **Explicit work with discrete words**

In my lectures I do not use the methods of work with separate words so often. One of the reasons for this is that Japanese students are already used to learning lexis separately from grammar, cramming the vocabulary intensively. In Japan teachers tend to emphasize too much on features of single words and do not have enough focus on lexical collocations. Memorizing words from long vocabulary lists and/or repetitive usage of word cards seem rather dull and mechanical activities. They imply very little student involvement and usually are of little effect.

Still, there are some methods of work with separate words I recommend using in teaching English vocabulary.

1. Translation of separate words from English into Japanese and vice versa.

This kind of work is useful only when it is part of a system of exercises and not the main method of work on lexis. By no means should it be reduced to ineffective mechanical cramming of words.

Here are several methods of work using translation of discrete words.

- a) **The teacher says a word and the student translates it orally.** As a rule, I make one word from the list to be translated at least 3 times by different



students.

b) **The teacher gives out word cards to students and the students translate them orally or in writing.** While working with cards the teacher can give individual assignments.

c) **The teacher dictates some words and the students translate them in writing in their notebooks or on separate sheets of paper.** Then the teacher checks them. But considering the time you need to check the words, this method seems improper for big classes (of more than 20 students).

d) **The teacher gives a Japanese word to translate into English.** The students translate the word and then try to make sentences with it. Sometimes we may have a dilemma, when a student translated the word correctly, but using another word the teacher did not expect him to use. Usually I do not mind if the word is not from the vocabulary list and rather welcome it, but sometimes we need to correct the student if he uses words that are not on the list on purpose.

e) **The teacher gives a word and then says in what context (word combination, sentence) it should be used.** This is one of the best ways to explain the real meaning of the word. Japanese students are often very particular about how to translate the one and only word in the sentence. It often becomes an obstacle for them to grasp the meaning of the whole sentence. Moreover, in many cases, the meanings of Japanese and English words do not fit. Where English speakers can see only one meaning Japanese speakers may discern two (and vice versa). So explanation of the context is vital when you teach English in Japan.

In my lectures I sometimes use crosswords, word quizzes or games to make the memorizing not a hard task, but rather the fun of being engaged in some competition.

## 2. Grouping words.

The teacher asks students to recollect all the words (lexis) they know which have a certain common feature and to group them. The principle of grouping can vary depending on the task:

a) Group the words the students learn in categories of their own making.

b) Group similar looking words.

c) Group strange looking words.

d) Find synonyms and antonyms and group them.

e) Group the words based on their grammar description.

f) Group the words belonging to word-building elements.

g) Group the words belonging to a certain topic.

Grouping words by a topic principle is especially important. Grouping and reproducing word combinations and sentences on the basis of a certain topic is an intermediate exercise between a topic grouping of words and natural communication in a foreign language.

## 3. Analysis of word-building elements.

One of the tasks of work on lexis is teaching students to distinguish the root, prefix and suffix and understand the role of these elements in forming the meaning of the word and its grammatical description. While explaining English word-building elements to Japanese students, who used to think of a word as a "combination of kanji (Chinese characters used in Japanese)," it may be helpful sometimes to use their concept. Thus English prefixes -un- or -im- can be associated with Japanese kanji "fu" 不 or "mu" 無. (Eg. possible = 可能 "kanou", impossible = 不可能 "fukanou")

In other times the following exercises can help to develop students' skills of differentiating word-building elements and comprehending their semantics:

a) At the beginning the teacher draws the students' attention to the structure of the known word and then gives them a new word with some analogous word-building elements asking them to define its meaning.

This exercise develops the skill of identifying the meanings of new words on the basis of word-building elements.

b) The teacher introduces a new word orally or in writing and asks the students to identify its structural elements and recollect the words having the analogous structure they have learnt earlier. Or if this task is too difficult for the students, the teacher may ask them to find similar words in the text, vocabulary list, etc.

c) While classifying and reviewing the assimilated lexis the teacher organizes the students' work on grouping the words having common word-building elements (see 2f)

## 4. Recollecting and reproducing separate words

with the help of visual aids.

The teacher shows an object or a picture of an object and the students say what they see in English.

The student's answer may include:

- a) A word denoting an object;
- b) A sentence of a given type with the word.

The teacher may use a complex picture for giving the following assignments:

- 1) To name the objects pointed by the teacher;
- 2) To name as many objects as possible (in such a case the student independently finds the objects he can name in English).

The teacher may also demonstrate a picture or some objects on the table telling the students in advance that they have to memorize everything they can see. Then he covers everything with a sheet of paper and students name whatever they have seen in English.

5. Recollecting and reproducing the words on the basis of the teacher's leading instructions. For example:

- a) Vote on the most difficult word to spell. Try to spell it individually or corporately.
- b) Vote on the most difficult word to remember (explain why this word?)

6. Recollecting and reproducing the words whose meanings the teacher describes in English.

### Work with words in sentences

In my opinion the work on words in sentences can be highly effective. Students can identify not only the meaning of the word, but also what sentences or what environment the word is usually used in (word's sphere of use). The activities of that type should raise students' consciousness of the significant lexical items, and encourage learners to analyze the language and learn from what they discover themselves.

Here are some exercises of this type:

1. Reproducing sentences containing the given word.

This exercise may have several variants:

a) **The teacher says a word and gives the students some time for thinking it over, then calls the students who will have to make up a sentence with the word.** The exercise is good for competitive classes, but not for the groups where there is an obvious difference in English knowledge between the best students and their classmates.

b) **The teacher gives the same task to a**

**student individually.** This exercise is very good for small classes.

c) **The student gets some cards with a number of words, reads a certain word and makes up a corresponding sentence with it.**

d) **The teacher reads the words one after another and the students write down the corresponding sentences in their notebooks.** The teacher checks them later.

The above-listed exercises are highly effective for small classes. Focusing on separate words in the exercises is combined with an immediate transition to their contextual use. For big classes those exercises may be combined with word translation. Then the word or word combination in Japanese is the main point and the student's task is to silently translate it and immediately make up a sentence or a series of sentences with the word.

2. Filling in the blanks.

While doing this exercise the students insert the missing word or word combination in the sentences they read or hear. To be effective the exercises should be made up in such a way that the students' attention should be focused not only on the words they are inserting in the blanks, but also on the sentences that the students are completing. This exercise can also be done in the form of a game, a quiz or a group competition, which makes it easy to use even for indifferent or reluctant students.

3. Substitution tables.

The process of substitution does not by itself guarantee the needed results; the teacher should use the following methods helping to focus the students' attention on the proper learning material and fix it in their memory. They are as follows,

1) After working on the substitution table the teacher gives a number of tasks:

a) Say/write down as many sentences as you can recollect from the ones you made up with the help of the substitution table.

b) Say the sentence you have made up with the word...(the teacher says the word).

c) Translate the sentence (the teacher gives the sentences made up with the help of the substitution table).

d) Say the words that could be used for substitution in the table besides the ones that you have already used.

In a case where the students do the exercises

badly, they should work on the table and then turn back to the above-mentioned exercises because they oppose the tendency of mechanically reproducing the material prompted by the table and help to fix lexical, phraseological and structural material in their memory.

2) After working on the substitution table it is good for students to work without seeing it.

In such a case the following methods of work are possible:

a) The teacher requires that the students should reproduce the model sentence impeccably.

b) The teacher prompts some English words for substitution in the model sentence and the students say the new sentences.

To make sure that the students are doing the work conscientiously, sometimes it is expedient to prompt the word that alters the meaning of the sentence.

c) The teacher gives Japanese words and the students translate and substitute them in the sentences.

The described training work leads students to a significantly higher stage of substitution exercises.

#### 4. Translating sentences.

The main demands for translating sentences (groups of sentences) as a method of assimilating lexis.

1) In the sentence given for translation the only unknown element should be the word that is to be assimilated. It means that the grammar construction of the sentence and other words needed for formalizing the thought expressed by a Japanese sentence should be assimilated in such a way that the students could reproduce them easily, without any preliminary thought required.

2) As for the new words introduced into the sentence for translation, they should be partially assimilated earlier with the help of some other exercises so as not to complicate the translation, allowing for easy recollection.

It should be noted that it is next to impossible to present all exercises and methods the teacher can use for teaching vocabulary. There are plenty of them.

### **Some tips for teaching English vocabulary in Japan**

In addition, it should be mentioned that each country has its specific character that should be taken into consideration for successfully teaching English in

general and its vocabulary in particular. There is some information available that can be used as tips for teaching English vocabulary in Japan.

Miki Ikeda writes, "The Japanese student has a head start in learning English vocabulary. Although the origins of Japanese and English have no relationship, the Japanese use English words for many imported products, names of food, technological terms, medical terms, concepts and ideas, etc. When the student begins to learn English words, he has already many known words, which he uses daily.

Example:

Terebi	koohii	mania
for television	for coffee	for maniac
[t'l'bi]	[kohi]	[mania]

However, these English words could be a drawback. Since Japanese changes the pronunciation of these English words into a more Japanese style, when the student pronounces these words in English, he tends to pronounce them with a Japanese accent. The teacher needs to be aware of the student's pronunciation of these English words." (M. Ikeda)

Another tip may be found in the article "The role of the first language in foreign language learning" by Paul Nation, *Asian EFL Journal*, June 2003 Volume 5. Issue 2, Article 1. In it he writes, "Increasingly, languages borrow a lot of words from English. Daulton (1998) for example estimates that about half of the most common 3000 words of English have some borrowed form in Japanese. Sometimes the borrowing has resulted in so many formal and semantic changes that the relationship to English is hard to see (*wan-piisu* - a one piece dress), but most often the relationship is clear (*waasuto* - worst). Encouraging learners to notice this borrowing and to use the loan words to help the learning of English is a very effective vocabulary expansion strategy."

Daulton (1998) also argues that "Japanese loanwords are a preexisting lexical resource that students can employ in more effective ways to improve their acquisition of English vocabulary." and "the recall and recognition of lexical items with loanword cognates, i.e., basewords, is considerably better than for those without, i.e., nonbasewords."

According to Schmitt and Meara (Schmitt and Meara, 1997) "Japanese students do not know many inflections and derivative suffixes for English verbs." In view of this it might be also effective for English teachers in Japan to introduce the system of building



vocabulary through prefixes, roots and suffixes into their classrooms. In his paper “Building Vocabulary Through Prefixes, Roots & Suffixes”, W. Pittman states the following, “*By slowly and steadily studying the most prominent prefixes, roots, and suffixes, students can acquire a vocabulary that is far greater than the sum of its parts. To my mind, there is no aspect of language that is more important than vocabulary building and comprehension. Using this system, I have been rewarded over and over again by grateful students. With patience and perseverance, I am sure you will have the same experience.*”

J. Finnis adds another tip, “*The key to successful English teaching in Japan is remembering most Japanese learners have already had 6 years plus of English lessons at school. They are not looking for more of the same... Many learners have considerable latent knowledge of English (vocabulary and grammar rules) but have little opportunity to put it to use. The most important quality of a conversation teacher is a friendly and engaging personality, able to give learners the confidence to put into practice what they already know.*”

### Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to emphasize the importance of teaching English vocabulary from the students' point of view. As the recent survey in our university shows, 76% of first year students and 74% of second year students mentioned English vocabulary to be one of their priorities in studying English. Many Japanese students think that their English vocabulary is inconsistent and would like to improve it. But at the same time they are reluctant to apply the grammar knowledge and English vocabulary they already have in everyday life. So, in my opinion, the problem should be considered not in the field “how to teach them English vocabulary,” but “how to make them apply what they already learned”. And if the students do not use the knowledge they already have, they will never feel confident enough to take part in conversation even on the simplest of topics. Considering this I would like to encourage English instructors in Japan to try some new approaches based on communication (such as task-based language teaching (TBLT), communicative language teaching (CLT) and so on), rather than sticking to a traditional grammar-based approach, which still dominates in most high schools and universities in Japan.

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